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PAGE 40

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His Least Silent Mission

In his 68 years, Vernon A. Walters has been a deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency, a globe-trotting troubleshooter and special aide to seven Presidents. A gifted interpreter who speaks seven foreign languages,* he helped arrange the 1970 negotiations between Henry Kissinger and the North Vietnamese that led to the final U.S. withdrawal from Viet Nam. A year later, in another secret mission for Kissinger, he took part in the preparations for Richard Nixon's historic opening to China. As an Ambassador-at-Large for the Reagan Administration, Walters has visited 108 countries. Many of these tasks were performed far from the glare of publicity. Last February, when the President named him to the highly visible post of U.S. Ambassador to the U.N., Walters took on a job that represented a considerable change of pace.

Born in New York City and schooled in France and Britain, Walters spent 35 years in the U.S. Army, retiring as a lieutenant general in 1976. But he is remembered from those days less as a soldier than as a skilled specialist in what he calls "silent missions," a phrase he used as the title of his 1978 autobiography. Kissinger remembers Walters as a consummate translator and "a great actor able to render not only the words but the intonation and attitude of the speaker." If there was anything Walters enjoyed more than "imitating the men for whom he was translating," Kissinger once wrote, "it was arranging clandestine

meetings." Walters was involved earlier this year in an effort to free the remaining U.S. hostages in Lebanon, but he does not discuss such matters. "It's like being in intelligence," he says. "If you boast of success, you can never repeat it."

In his new role, Walters describes himself as "a pragmatist tinged with idealism." He favors a policy of "constructive ambiguity" to disarm his opponents, explaining, "I know how unpleasant surprises are to me, and so I'm going to try to make it equally unpleasant for them." He is fond of the canapé-and-cocktail aspects of the job. A bachelor, he spends long hours entertaining U.N. diplomats in his apartment at the Waldorf Towers and visiting their delegations around Manhattan. "I believe that in an environment like the U.N.," he says, "you get a lot more with sugar than you do with salt."

On the other hand, he can be formidable in his defense of U.S. policy. In his first appearance at the Security Council last June, he attacked what he regarded as intentional misrepresentation of the U.S. position on Namibia. "The U.S. yields to no one in its support of Namibian independence," he declared. Then, fixing his gaze on the Vietnamese representative, he snapped, "Countries that crush opposition at home are scarcely qualified to judge the functioning of democracy."

Walters maintains that the U.N. cannot be considered a failure. "It still provides a court of world opinion, a forum where every nation can make its voice heard, no matter how small it is." That, he argues, is an obvious advantage for the U.N.'s members—"even when they are wrong."



Ambassador Walters at his desk

*Russian, French, German, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian.